

## How Disciples Grow Spiritually

*By Mark E. Viator*

When we understand how a disciple grows spiritually, we begin to see how we can become intentional and strategic about making disciples. Just as every person is born into this world physically, and grows through the cycle of life from an infant to a grandparent, spiritual growth is very similar. In each stage of our physical lives, there are characteristics that correlate to of each phase of physical life. Spiritual growth is similar. There are spiritual characteristics that correlate to each phase of our spiritual growth process.

The purpose of this article is to identify six (6) phases or stages of spiritual growth and the perspectives, beliefs, expressions and needs that are characterized at each of these stages.

The six stages of spiritual growth are as follows:

1. The Spiritually Dead
2. The Spiritual Infant
3. The Spiritual Child
4. The Spiritual Adolescent
5. The Spiritual Young Adult
6. The Spiritual Parent and Grandparent

People will reveal their spiritual condition by their words and their actions. In Matthew 12:33-37, Jesus said, <sup>33</sup> ***“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup> A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. <sup>36</sup> But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”*** Words are an indication of our spiritual condition.

In Matthew 7:16-20, Jesus said, <sup>16</sup> ***You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”*** Jesus indicated that our deeds or “fruits” are indicators of our spiritual condition as well.

By examining the words and actions of individuals, we can determine the spiritual phase or spiritual growth stage of the individual. This information can be very valuable for spiritual leaders in the church to evaluate and know the spiritual condition and needs of those they oversee and how to assist them to grow.

Just as each physical growth stage in life has very specific characteristics, each spiritual stage has needs that when addressed enable them to grow to the next spiritual stage. There are spiritual needs for each stage for healthy spiritual growth. After understanding the needs of each spiritual phase, we can design a discipleship process that enhances growth through each spiritual phase of life. Our goal is to bring people from being spiritually dead to becoming spiritual parents and grandparent as disciple makers.

Jesus commands us all to make disciples of all nations. We are to fulfill His command when he said in Matthew 28:18-20, ***"All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all things that I have commanded, and lo I will be with them until the end of the age."***

The purpose of this document is to take each of the six (6) spiritual phases and to identify the characteristics, the words, perspectives and the needs associated with each spiritual stage, in order to assist an individual to grow efficiently through each phase. When the spiritual condition of an individual is identified, a spiritual growth plan can be developed that provides an individual with the knowledge, training, attention, and support needed to advance spiritually to the next phase until reaching spiritual maturity.

Although it is helpful to know the characteristics of each spiritual growth stage, as a word of caution, do not fall into the trap of comparing levels of spiritual maturity. The purpose of this information is to understand in order to be intentional to guide and direct the spiritual growth process. This information used to categorize people in order to compare spirituality as a badge of honor is no more than a sign of spiritual immaturity and should not be used in this manner.

## **1. The Spiritually Dead:**

The Bible teaches that we were all spiritually dead and separated from God until we received grace through placing our trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Ephesians 2:1-5(NKJV) states ***"And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),..."***

### **A. Characteristics of the Spiritually Dead:**

The two most prevalent characteristics of the Spiritually Dead are **unbelief and rebellion**. Listed below is a list of spiritual characteristics of the Spiritually Dead. The Spiritually Dead cannot understand the word of God or the things of God. Jesus told a rich Jewish ruler named Nicodemus in John 3:3, ***Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*** A spiritually dead person cannot understand the things of God or the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 2:14, ***But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.***

They do not have an understanding of scriptural truth. They live based upon the perspectives of what they have learned through the culture and the world. Their beliefs are based upon what they have heard or what they believe. Many do not believe there are moral absolutes. They have a fear of dying and have no certainty of where they will go when they die because they have not been born again by the Spirit of God by receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

**B. The Words and Perspectives of the Spiritually Dead:**

- *"I don't believe there is a God."*
- *"I think that God is just a crutch for weak people."*
- *"I believe there is one God but many ways to get to Him."*
- *"I believe that I am as good as anyone else."*
- *"I have anger toward Christians and the church because they seem to be hypocrites."*
- *"I am confused about God, Jesus and the Church."*
- *"I am not sure of the whether the Bible is God's word."*
- *"I am a Christian because I go to church and I am a good person."*
- *"I believe that there is no hell because God is a God of love."*
- *"I read the Bible but I cannot understand it and it does not make sense to me."*
- *"I believe that a good person goes to heaven, a bad person goes to hell."*
- *"I believe that if a person's good works are greater than their bad works, God may grant them to go to heaven when they die."*
- *"I don't know where I will go when I die."*
- *"I have a fear of dying."*
- *"I have questions related to understanding how to receive Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior."*

C. **Needs of the Spiritually Dead Person:** The Spiritually Dead have a need of the following items to become born again.

1. A relationship with someone who is authentic to see the Gospel lived out in their presence
2. The concern and courage of someone who even cares about their spiritual condition
3. An explanation of the Gospel.
4. Answers to their questions, excuses and objections about the Bible, God, Christianity and so on...
5. An invitation to receive Christ.

As believers, we must care about the spiritual condition of our families, friends, those we work with, the people we come in contact. We must risk even being rejected that the spiritual dead can be brought to spiritual life through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

**2. The Spiritual Infant:**

Jesus said in John 3:5-6, *Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."* Jesus told Nicodemus that there is a physical birth (of the water) and there is a spiritual birth (of the spirit). When a person receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, they pass from spiritual death to spiritual life and become a new born spiritual infant. Growing from spiritual infancy to spiritual childhood is not dependent upon time. It is dependent of the rate at which they progress through spiritual infancy and display the characteristics of spiritual childhood. There is nothing more exciting than knowing that a new baby is coming. The reactions of family and friends of seeing a new born baby fills the hearts and minds of those that experience such a special occasion.

## **A. Characteristics of Spiritual Infants:**

The characteristics that best describe the characteristics of infancy are: **1) ignorance, 2) confusion, and 3 ) protection and 4) dependence upon their parents.** Left to themselves, they do not have the ability to feed themselves, dress themselves, protect themselves or tend themselves. Spiritual infants do not know Biblical truth. They mix the myths of our culture with religious things they have heard or believe. They are confused because they do not know how to replace old habits with the habits and attitudes necessary to become a follower of Jesus Christ. New born infants need to be fed and receive protection because they have a need to be dependent upon others for their spiritual growth.

1 Peter 2:1-3(NKJV) states, ***“Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”*** Physical age, education, and life experiences do not exempt a person from entering the Christian life as a spiritual infant. When people are spiritual infants, their words and their actions reveal their spiritual state.

## **B. Perspectives and Words of Spiritual Infants:**

- *“I don’t think that I need to go to church regularly.”*
- *“I’ve been hurt by a lot of people, so it’s just me and God. I don’t need others.”*
- *“I watch church and get what I need from church services on television.”*
- *“I don’t have time for church. Sundays are my only time to rest and unwind.”*
- *“I am confused about how the church works and why we do certain things.”*
- *“I read the Bible but do not know much and I feel inadequate around other church people.”*
- *“I am not sure about what the Bible says about life and how to live as a Christian.”*
- *“I have a frustration that churches place unrealistic expectations on people.”*
- *“I desire to have church relationships, but do not know how to connect with other people.”*
- *“I prayed to receive Christ and felt at the time that I was saved. But because of sin in my life, I question whether or not I am actually saved.”*
- *“I struggle with sins in my life and I find myself asking for forgiveness for the same thing over and over because I am not certain whether or not God has forgiven me.”*
- *“When people talk about praying, I am not sure I really know how to do that effectively, because I can’t pray like other people that I hear pray.”*
- *“There are times I feel like a spiritual failure.”*
- *“it seems like I take one step forward and two steps backward.”*
- *“If I pray and read my Bible I believe that fulfills my needs.”*
- *“I am excited about the new truths that I am discovering in God’s word.”*
- *“God answered my specific prayers in a way that has shown me that God answers prayer.”*

C. **Needs of the Spiritual Infant:** Listed below are the needs that Spiritual Infants have to grow the next stage of Spiritual Childhood.

1. Commitment to follow Christ and to commit to Baptism as the first act of obedience
2. Individual, personal attention of a disciple-maker and/or spiritual parent to thrive.
3. Caring protection during this vulnerable stage of discipleship.
4. The pure milk of the word (1 Pet. 2:2-3). The reading and study of the Gospel of John serves as a great start.
5. A church family that assist in growth development process.
6. Developing new habits that become the rhythms they will live by as disciples such as:
  - a. Weekly church attendance
  - b. Regular Bible reading
  - c. Having a prayer life
  - d. To read and study the words of Jesus.
  - e. How to confess your sins and to receive forgiveness for sin
  - f. To tell others what God has done in their life since they have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior
7. Teaching and modeling the new truths of the Christian faith.

As I write this article, my 10 month granddaughter is crawling and pulling herself up. She gets excited and claps when she discovers new things that bring her pleasure. Just as a parent is there with a toddler when they pet a dog, or taste a new food for the first time, the parent is there to laugh, smile and enjoy the new experience together with them. This brings joy to both the parent and the toddler. To see spiritual infants experience God and His word brings joy as well. But without the help of someone to encourage them and assist them in discovering new things, they are left to find things on their own without anyone to share in the experience.

### 3. **The Spiritual Child:**

Writers of the New Testament wrote concerning spiritual childhood. The Apostle Paul admonished the Corinthian church not to flip flop between the spiritual and the carnal nature. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-4(NKJV) he said, ***“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?”***

In 1 John 2:1(NKJV) John stated, ***“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*** Although all believers have a need to overcoming sin, it is an admonition of spiritual children.

## **A. Characteristics of the Spiritual Child:**

Although spiritual children have made the connection that they belong to a spiritual family, the most common characteristic of spiritual children is that of **self centeredness**. We all struggle with selfishness from time to time, but children are self-centered because they see themselves as being the center of their world and interpret everything from the perspective of “me”.

Spiritual children are often more concerned about their own needs and wants more than the needs and wants of others. This is why they need a spiritual family to help them begin the process of getting their eyes off of themselves and on to others.

## **B. Perspectives and Words of the Spiritual Child:**

- *“I feel at times that no one cares about me and what I am going through.”*
- *“I lack wisdom about how to use what I am learning.”*
- *“I still have a hard time forgiving those who have hurt me.”*
- *“I have a need to learn how to overcome the temptations that I seem to struggle with.”*
- *“When I come to church, I do not feel that my spiritual needs are being met.”*
- *“When I come to church, it does not seem to me that anyone cares about me.”*
- *“I want to learn something at church that I am interested in. Something that meets my needs.”*
- *“I seem to be on a spiritual roller coaster of spiritual highs and lows.”*
- *“I do not clearly understand when I am hearing from God, myself or the devil.”*
- *“I do not fully understand the Bible and need someone to help me.”*
- *“I have a need to understand how to do spiritual things like prayer or how to study the Bible.”*
- *“I do not know what Christians should do or not do.”*
- *“I have a tendency to try to mimic mature Christians’ behaviors in order to look good.”*
- *“I still have confusion about spiritual things and have an incomplete view of biblical subjects.”*
- *“I have more knowledge about what Pastors and others say than what the Word says.”*
- *“I would like to know how to be a member of Cathedral and to learn what Cathedral’s is seeking to do as a church.”*
- *“I have a spiritual gift that others do not have, I need to share with them how they can have the same spiritual gift that I have.”*

## **C. Needs of the Spiritual Child:** Listed below are the needs that Spiritual Children have to grow the next stage of Spiritual Adolescents.

1. Developing additional habits that become the rhythms they will live by as disciples such as:
  - a. Putting off sin / leave old life
  - b. Forgiving others
  - c. Serving others
  - d. Avoiding temptation
  - e. Redirecting their thought life
  - f. Discerning media intake

- g. Sharing their testimony
  - h. Tithing
  - i. Weekly Discipleship
2. A relational connection to a church family
  3. Help for how to start feeding themselves spiritually
  4. Teaching about who they are in Christ
  5. Teach them to believe about themselves what God says about them and not what they have been told by others.
  6. Teaching about how to have a relationship with Christ and with other believers
  7. Teaching about appropriate expectations concerning other believers

During childhood, kids learn how to do things that show progress in their development. They learn how to button a shirt, tie their shoes, feed themselves and ride a bike. All of this shows development toward being able to do things for themselves. It is in spiritual childhood, that the same type of spiritual progress takes place. Learning how to pray, study God's word, hear God's voice and the basic habits and disciplines necessary for growth.

#### 4. The Spiritual Adolescent:

Just as teenagers at times show glimpses of maturity, many times they show traits of children. Spiritual Adolescents are children who are growing to become Spiritual Young Adults. This phase or stage of spiritual growth and maturity has overlapping tendencies between childhood and young adulthood.

More insight can be gathered in the characteristic and perspectives listed below.

##### A. Characteristics of Spiritual Adolescents:

There are three characteristics of Spiritual Adolescents. The **first characteristic** is that **they are growing in faithfulness**. Paul spoke of this faithfulness in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2(NKJV) when he said, ***"Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful"***. Faithfulness also implies a consistency that continues to persevere. The Hebrew writer told his readers in Hebrews 3:12-13(NKJV) ***"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."***

Just as teenagers sometimes have enough knowledge to be dangerous, Spiritual Adolescents can be idealistic. They may have partial knowledge and understanding. The **second characteristic** of Spiritual Adolescents, is that **they are idealistic**. Paul told his son in the ministry in 2 Timothy 2:14-15(NKJV) ***"Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*** The Corinthian Church demonstrated childish behavior over their views and conduct of favoring one minister over another, spiritual wisdom, immorality allowed in the church, the legal proceedings between believers, principles of marriage,

whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols, the Lord's Supper, confusion over spiritual gifts and which gifts were indications of spirituality, and over the resurrection. When a person is idealistic, they tend to take a position and discuss or argue the information from their position instead of seeking the full truth. Those who are idealistic sometimes are more concerned with being right and they do not realize that the anger, pride and haughtiness that comes forth because they are more interested in being right than in showing love. 1 Corinthians 13 addresses the priority of love over whether or not I have a spectacular spiritual gift that others may not have. The priority of showing love overcomes one's beliefs and actions that display negative behaviors that are contrary to a life indwelt by the Spirit of God. In 1 Corinthians 13:4-8(NKJV), Paul said, ***"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails..."***

The **third characteristic** of Spiritual Adolescents is that at times they are either **overconfident or under confident**. Teenagers vacillate between maturity and immaturity by either expressing that they know all and can do all or they show forth an insecurity of seeing themselves as others see them instead of viewing themselves from God's perspective. Spiritual Adolescents have a way of reverting back to childhood because of insecurity, when they should continue to grow to full maturity. The Hebrew writer spoke of this type of situation in Hebrews 5:12-14(NKJV) when faced with persecution, he told them ***"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil"***.

#### **B. Perspectives and Words of Spiritual Adolescents:**

- *"I have a tendency to serve others in a ministry as long as the benefit outweighs the cost."*
- *"Today I argued with another believer about a spiritual topic. I found myself getting mad because he did not see it my way."*
- *"I desire to deepen my relationships with other believers so that I can grow as a follower of Jesus."*
- *"I desire to be in a small group so that I can grow spiritually with other believers."*
- *"I need to understand how to study God's word and to apply what I learn."*
- *"I have a friend that I would like to become involved with me in our church."*
- *"At times, I see things that need to be done in the church to make our church even better, but I don't know what to do to bring about positive change."*
- *"I want to understand how I can start to spiritually feed myself."*
- *"I want to understand who I am in Christ and to help others understand the same thing."*
- *"I have a need for teaching about how to have a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ."*
- *"I have a need to hang out with other believers and how to grow in relationship with other believers."*
- *"I have an enthusiasm about new teachings and new spiritual truths."*



C. **Needs of Spiritual Adolescents:** Listed below are the needs that Spiritual Adolescents have to grow the next stage of Spiritual Young Adulthood.

1. Spiritual models and examples to follow in ministry and disciple making
2. Positive influences of spiritual parents or spiritual young adult to guide them when they struggle or fall
3. Positive peer influence to grow spiritually or to correct misguided actions and perspectives
4. Positive peer groups that foster spiritual growth and provide right words, thoughts and actions
5. Spiritual teaching, reproof and correction by loving spiritual parents
6. Spiritual love, affirmation and encouragement

It was Dr. James Dobson that said the best advise that he could give a parent concerning their teenagers is: ***“just get them through the teenage year the best and soonest way you can”***. Teenagers are notorious for knowing everything or knowing enough to be dangerous. Sometime the spiritual adolescent is the same. Moments of splendor showing potential mixed with times of immaturity and child like tendencies. We must do our part to support them, help them and love them through this spiritual stage.

## 5. **The Spiritual Young Adult:**

The fifth phase of spiritual growth is the Spiritual Young Adult. Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1-7(NKJV) ***“You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops. Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.”***

### A. **Characteristics of Spiritual Young Adults:**

Spiritual Young Adults are known for three main characteristics. Just as children are characterized by self-centeredness, the first characteristic of the Spiritual Young Adult is on the other end of the spectrum by being **characterized as serving others with joy**. Spiritual Young Adult use their motivational gifts to serve others in the Body of Christ. Paul admonishes the Roman Church in Romans 12:3-8(NKJV) when he said, ***“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”***

The second characteristic of Spiritual Young Adult's is that **they are "others centered" with humility** instead of being self-centered. As we grow into Spiritual Young Adulthood, our focus and perspectives are less concerned about ourselves and shift to the needs of others. In Philippians 2:3-16, Paul shows the type of spiritual maturity exemplified in the spiritually mature. He says, ***"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."***

Paul continues and shows the reward of humbling ourselves and putting people first. He said, ***"Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain."***

The third characteristic of Spiritual Young Adults is that they demonstrate that they are willing to **sacrifice for others**. In 1 John 3:16-17(NKJV), the beloved disciple encouraged his readers by saying: ***"By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?"***

As we grow spiritually, we become more like Christ and take on his character and become more mature. Paul told the Church of Rome in Romans 12:9-21(NKJV) ***"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."***

**B. Perspectives and Words of Spiritual Young Adults:**

- *"I have a desire to serve others for the glory of God."*
- *"I have a desire to serve in an area of ministry but would like for someone to ask me to serve or show me how I can get involved."*
- *"I need to be trained in how to better serve others and to help them grow spiritually."*
- *"I have had tough times in my life that God has helped me get through. I would like to help others get through the same tough times by sharing with them the things God has taught me if given the opportunity."*
- *"I need for someone to help me identify my spiritual gifts, abilities and how I can use them to serve God."*
- *"I get excited when I see our church filled or when I see God moving in our church."*
- *"I think I could lead a small group with a little help and training."*
- *"I have either taught before or think that I could teach a small group."*
- *"I need to find a place to serve Christ and others in my church."*
- *"I would like to be taught how I could lead someone to Christ."*
- *"I would like to teach the Bible or courses that help people grow spiritually."*
- *"I believe that there is a great need for ongoing relationships that offer encouragement and accountability related to serving Christ in my church."*
- *"I need a more mature believer to help guide me in my ministry and the boundaries of what I should do and what I should not do."*
- *"I would like to know the appropriate expectations of people that serve in ministry."*
- *"I have shared my testimony but have not led anyone to Christ. I would like to learn how to lead someone to pray to receive Jesus."*

**C. Needs of the Spiritual Young Adult:** Listed below are the needs that Spiritual Young Adults have to grow the next stage of Spiritual Parenthood.

1. Help them to discover their gifts, spiritual passions, abilities, skills, personality and experiences
2. Ministry job shadowing or apprenticeship type opportunities to serve God and others
3. Opportunity and a place to learn how to serve
4. A spiritual parent who will debrief with them about ministry experiences
5. Help for establishing boundaries
6. Guidance regarding appropriate expectations of people they will serve
7. On-going relationships that offer encouragement and accountability
8. Skills training
9. Leadership development training

Spiritual Young Adults shift their focus from the needs of themselves to the needs of others. Traits of maturity are prevalent at this stage. The words and deeds at this stage of spiritual growth yield great results because of the act of service extended toward others.

## 6. The Spiritual Parent / Grandparent:

This is the last stage of a disciple's growth. This phase of spiritual life incorporates the positive characteristics of the Spiritual Young Adult. But in addition to these characteristics, the word parent is used instead of adult because a parent is someone who has children. Spiritual parents are known for producing spiritual children. Spiritual Parents are known for **intentionality and they are reproductive in nature**. They intentionally produce other disciples who in turn make other disciples.

Paul spoke of this relationship as a father. In 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12(NKJV), he stated ***"You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory"***.

Just as physical growth results in greater responsibility, spiritual parenthood requires added responsibility and is where the work really begins. Paul stated in 2 Timothy 2:10(NKJV), ***"Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."***

### A. Characteristics of Spiritual Parents / Grandparents:

There are five (5) characteristics of spiritual parenthood. The first is that Spiritual Parents **reproduce disciples**. They fulfill the command to make disciples. They intentionally fulfill the process of building relationships that open doors to lead others to follow Jesus. They assist disciples from spiritual infancy through spiritual young adulthood grow through the stages of spiritual growth.

Secondly, Spiritual Parents **feed and tend their spiritual children**. They are willing to spend the time and energy needed to see spiritual infants, children and adolescents grow and mature.

Thirdly, Spiritual Parents **feed and tend themselves**. They know how to nourish themselves spiritually and depend upon God to meet their needs by faith and trust in God Himself. They seek answers through the Bible and have a dependence upon God for their emotional and spiritual support.

The fourth characteristic of spiritual parents is they **sacrifice and suffer for the sake of those in their care**. Paul ***"endured all things for the sake of the elect"***. Spiritual parents are willing to do things when it is not convenient or comfortable.

The fifth characteristic of a spiritual parent is that they **value the church family as a team** that works as a collective body to nurture each part of the body together. They understand that it is through the collective body of the church that the mission of the church is fulfilled. The church is to be a unified family. Just as parents care about their family having harmony and unity, a spiritual parent seeks to address conflicts that cause division in the family. Spiritual parents are intentional about having disciples exist in a peaceful, harmonious and unified manner. They know that it is as each part of the body works together as a team to do its part, it causes growth of the body and the successful fulfillment of the mission of Jesus.

## **B. Perspectives and Words of Spiritual Parents / Grandparents:**

- *"I think in terms of what could be done if everyone worked together toward a common purpose."*
- *"I have a desire to see the people mature and become fellow workers to complete their mission."*
- *"I have a person in my small group who is passionate about children. I would like for them to have the opportunity to reach and teach children in ministry."*
- *"My greatest desire is to see believers and those in ministry grow to their full potential."*
- *"I desire to see our church reach more people."*
- *"I would like to grow as a leader and lead others."*
- *"I believe that our church needs to raise up leaders and have them serve as co-laborers as a team to fulfill the ministry of our church."*
- *"I know that if we are to help people grow spiritually, we have to be relational and spend time with people."*
- *"I have a desire to encourage and coach those serving in ministry."*
- *"I get as much satisfaction when I see those that I lead, lead others to grow spiritually."*
- *I have led people to Christ and can teach others how to as well.*
- *"The greatest feeling that I receive is to see those who I have led to the Lord, and invested in them as disciples, go out and lead others to the Lord and disciple them to spiritual maturity."*

## **C. Needs of Spiritual Parent / Grandparents:** Listed below are the needs of Spiritual Parents to be successful in helping others grow in the stages of spiritual maturity.

1. On-going relationships with other disciple-makers
2. A church family that provides a supportive intentional strategy that they can be a part
3. A church family that provides the opportunity to serve and reproduce disciples
4. A church family in which they can disciple people as part of a team
5. A church family in which they can receive peer accountability, encouragement and affirmation
6. Coaching and leadership training that assist them to increase their disciple making skills
7. The reward and self satisfaction of seeing their spiritual children and grandchildren grow and fulfill the reproductive process of having spiritual disciples.

Spiritual maturity is not complete unless disciples are reproduced and "raised" from infancy to adulthood. The reproductive process is essential for Christianity to be sustained as a movement of the Spirit of God. Yes we know that God's Spirit can do more in three seconds than we can do in three lifetimes. But, we must be willing to sacrifice our time, talents and treasure and to exert and toil in labor to do the "small things" that are needed to birth and raise spiritual children.

## **Discipleship Requires Flesh and Blood:**

In Matthew 16:15-17 (NKJV) Jesus asked his disciples, ***"But who do you say that I am?"*** Simon Peter answered and said, ***"You are the Christ, the son of the living God."*** Jesus answered and said to him, ***"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."*** It is the Spirit of God who reveals to us that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the son of the living God.

But as one analyzes the spiritual needs associate with each spiritual growth stage, there is one thing that is common. Flesh and blood makes a difference. Whether it is to extend life to a spiritually dead person, or tend to needs of a spiritual new born, or to teach a spiritual child, or correct the adolescent, or encourage the spiritual young adult, it takes time to touch others through a constant, impression building relationship that makes the difference.

Jesus changed the world by saying to twelve men, “follow me and I will make you”. To fishermen, he said, “follow me and I will make you fishers of men”. He spent only three years with these men and before he went to the cross, he prayed a prayer in John 17:4-8, ***I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have given them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me.***

Jesus states that He has finished the work that God had given Him to do. What was that work? He manifested God’s name, made known all things which God had given them, and gave them the words in which God had given Jesus.

It is as we spend time to care for, share with, spend time, teach, show, lead, correct, encourage and affirm people that we complete the work God has given us. People will respond to the human touch that is key to spiritual growth. The material we teach is very important. But, the relationships we establish with the people we disciple matters even more.

Principles taken from the book entitled “Real-Life Discipleship” by Jim Puttman, Avery Willis Jr., Brandon Guindon, and Bill Krause.